

Chicago officials plan to reopen schools for 20,000 students

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Chicago Public Schools (CPS) recently announced a proposal to return roughly 20,000 special education and pre-kindergarten students to in-person learning in the coming weeks. The plan to shift from online learning to a daily in-person schedule was announced last Friday as Illinois' seven-day average COVID-19 testing positivity rate surpassed five percent for the first time since early June.

The push to reopen the third largest district in the US takes place as the coronavirus pandemic spreads uncontrollably across much of the country. The number of COVID-19 cases in Illinois now stands at 368,746, with 9,688 deaths and over 2,300 people currently hospitalized.

CPS could move forward with the reopening proposal in early November, giving parents and teachers little time to prepare. Other grades are slated to remain online until January 2021, but by sending 20,000 students back to classrooms the district aims to set a precedent for a full reopening.

The district is exploiting the difficulties faced by special education and pre-K students with remote learning to press for school reopenings, while starving these and all other programs of the resources needed to provide high quality online learning.

Despite rising cases, Health Commissioner Dr. Allison Arwady gave her support for the reopening plan, claiming that there have been low infection rates among schoolchildren in private and parochial schools that have already returned to classrooms. However, any claims that reopening can be done safely or that schools are not vectors for the spread of the virus are wholly unscientific.

If there have been a small number of cases in private and parochial schools, this is primarily due to inadequate testing and reporting policies. Until last week, the Illinois Department of Health was tracking cases but would not release the names of schools where an outbreak took place. Further, these schools are better funded and able to

implement more safety measures than cash-strapped public schools.

On October 1, 58-year-old teacher Olga Quiroga, who taught in Chicago since 1991, died from COVID-19. Although her classes were taught virtually, Quiroga was forced to return to school for various preparatory events in which she had contact with parents. Following Quiroga's death, her daughter condemned the district's decision to reopen the schools, stating that for "my mom, it took one visit to that building to contract it." She added, "According to them, they're safe, they're ready, and they're clearly not."

In the US, at least 67,422 students and educators have been infected since school began in the fall, and at least 44 teachers, school nurses, bus drivers and other school workers have died. In New York, where schools reopened in September, the state recorded an 18 percent increase in cases over the last two weeks. Boston Public Schools announced on Wednesday that it would immediately suspend all in-person learning indefinitely, following an increase in the positivity rate in the city.

At a press conference last week, CEO of CPS Janice Jackson stated, "While we will begin the second quarter learning at home, our goal will be—and it must be—to reopen our school buildings for our most vulnerable students as soon as possible." Jackson, Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) all align with the Biden-Harris campaign and the Democratic Party as a whole, which falsely claim that schools can reopen "safely" amid a raging pandemic.

Last week, Kamala Harris tweeted, "@JoeBiden and I want to get your kids back to school as quickly and safely as possible." At Thursday's presidential debate, Joe Biden proclaimed that schools simply "need a lot of money to open," adding, "they need to deal with ventilation systems, smaller classes, more teachers, more

pods.”

However, the push to reopen schools takes place as districts and states are imposing unprecedented austerity. On Wednesday, Mayor Lightfoot announced a proposed austerity budget and a \$1.2 billion shortfall. Lightfoot’s budget shifts \$54 million in pension obligations and other items, such as crossing guards, onto the CPS budget.

CPS and Mayor Lightfoot are following the lead of New York City and Los Angeles, the two largest school districts in the US. Illinois is ruled by the Democratic Party, which controls both houses of the General Assembly, the governorship and the Chicago mayoralty. Nonetheless, the policies enacted are almost indistinguishable from cities and states run by Republicans.

The entire political establishment is justifying the disastrous reopening of schools in order to drive parents back to work. In pushing to open schools, CPS is citing historic declines in enrollment, which has decreased by a reported 14,500 this school year, mainly among black and Latino preschool and kindergarteners. Enrollment fell among all racial groups, with CPS reporting the greatest enrollment drop among black students. Neither preschool nor kindergarten are mandatory in Illinois.

Jackson said parents “have to go to work, and unfortunately because of our decisions, we’ve put them in a position where they have to choose between giving their child access to early education or going to work.”

This is a false choice. There are plenty of resources available in the pockets of the state’s 18 billionaires, whose combined wealth is almost \$60 billion. This includes Democratic Governor Pritzker, whose net worth exceeds \$3.4 billion.

The district claims that if in-person learning resumes, families will have the option to continue with remote learning. However, for many families this is no option at all as they cannot afford to keep their children home.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which has been in negotiations with CPS over reopening, objected primarily to not being consulted in the latest proposal. CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates said, “We cannot experiment or take lightly the responsibility that we will need to see from our mayor and Chicago Public Schools as reopening plans are hatched.”

Davis Gates added, “In fact, you cannot put together a plan in the dark of the night with only a few people that excludes our parents, that excludes our families, that excludes our educators, our practitioners and excludes our union.”

Noting the lack of ventilation in school buildings, with many of the facilities almost 100 years old and having antiquated heating systems, the CTU tweeted, “The district has denied our request for building inspections. This is a violation of our contract, and we will be filing an unfair labor practice charge.” Such lawsuits are a diversionary tactic and meant to forestall any mobilization of educators to oppose the unsafe reopening of schools.

The CTU, like the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), is doing everything in its power to channel teachers’ opposition behind the right-wing Biden campaign and the Democratic Party. During the 2019 Chicago teachers strike, the CTU hosted Democratic presidential candidates Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a former member of the now defunct International Socialist Organization, appeared in a campaign ad for Joe Biden.

Now, in a literal life-and-death situation, the union is doing everything in its power to keep teachers from walking out. They seek to reach a deal they can sell to their members, whom they have kept on the job with inadequate technology and support for both teachers and their students.

There is enormous opposition to the policy of reopening schools, which must be unified across district, state and national lines. This requires a break from the Democratic Party and their backers, including the CTU and pseudo-left organizations like the DSA, all of whom support the drive to reopen schools and the ruling class policy of herd immunity, which signifies death on a massive scale.

Every effort must be made to unite with broader sections of the working class, who face the same deadly conditions as teachers and school workers. All educators, parents and students who seek to mobilize a genuine fight against school reopenings in Chicago should join and help build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and contact us today.



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